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ANSWER TO THE ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE¹

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In my study of the suffrage movement, and it has been a subject of study with me for fifty years past, I have discovered but five arguments in support of this revolutionary demand.

It is claimed that the suffrage is a natural right, as much so as the rights of person and of property, and that we must do justice though the heavens fall. The notion that suffrage is a natural right is a relic of the French Revolution which has not survived in political philosophy the doctrinaires who gave birth to it. The rights of person are absolute and unconditioned. Whatever his age and condition, the child has a right to his life—killing the unborn infant is murder; his right to his property is absolute and unconditioned—if he is not old enough to administer it himself, a guardian is appointed, or his natural guardian is intrusted with its keeping and its care. But the right of suffrage is always determined by the community which grants it; it depends upon an age artificially determined on, upon a residence artificially defined. The would-be voter must have resided in the Nation a certain number of years, in the State a certain number of months, in the District a certain number of days. In some States he must have an educational qualification, in others a property qualification, and in others he must have paid taxes. But the payment of taxes does not give him a right to vote. He may pay taxes in every State in the Union, and in every county of the State, but he can vote only in one county of one State. Suffrage is a prerogative conferred by the community and conditioned when it is conferred. A man has no more natural right to vote in a political campaign than he has to vote in a State Legislature.

It is claimed that women must be given the suffrage to protect themselves from the injuries inflicted on them by men. I confess

¹Reprinted by permission from a paper on "The Profession of Motherhood," by Lyman Abbott in *The Outlook*, April 10, 1909.

that this claim arouses my indignation. To set class against class is bad, to set race against race is worse, to set religion against religion is even more perilous; but to set sex against sex is a degradation so deep that political polemics can no further go. That a hundred years ago women suffered under legal limitations which worked injustice is undoubtedly true. Some of them were framed for women's protection; others of them were a relic of an earlier barbarism. Both have disappeared with advancing civilization. All lawyers know that the prejudice of all juries and of many judges is in favor of woman in any case in which a woman is involved. All legislators know that a woman's lobby is a most difficult one to resist. If there are any disabilities under which women still suffer because they are women, I venture to affirm that a common appeal by women would invariably and quickly bring their repeal. I do not forget the appeal made last year by the teachers of New York City for a law requiring equal wages for equal work. But it was not an appeal by woman for woman; it was an appeal by a special class for that class. It was rightly vetoed by the Governor, for it violated the fundamental principle which has prevailed throughout the State of New York and, I believe, throughout all other States, according to which the details of school administration are left to the district in which the schools are situated; and it was irrational, because no man can exert a woman's influence and no woman can exert a man's influence in the school-room, so that neither can do the other's work. That the suffrage is not necessary to protect woman against the oppressions of man is strikingly illustrated by a recent decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in which it was decided that a law limiting the hours of woman's labor in the factory is constitutional and that she has a special right to protection by the law because of her special disadvantages, a right which the man working at her side does not possess.

This decision, rendered by a masculine court, upon briefs presented by masculine lawyers, serves to furnish at least an illustrative reply to those who contend that woman's suffrage is necessary to benefit the condition of woman wage-earners. Whatever legislation can accomplish for women wage-earners, this decision makes clear, can be accomplished under present conditions. What cannot be accomplished by legislation cannot be accomplished by suffrage. I have looked in vain in the publications of the woman

suffragists for any facts to show even remotely that political suffrage involves economic gain. It is true that the farm laborers of England obtained the suffrage and afterwards obtained increase of wages, but *post hoc* is not *propter hoc*, nor has any evidence been adduced that the improved industrial conditions were due to the changed political conditions. In our own country it is certain that the industrial condition of the negro under limited suffrage is far better than it was in the reconstruction period under unlimited suffrage, but it would be illogical to claim that the limitation of the suffrage has promoted economic welfare.

It is also claimed, with what adequacy of evidence I do not know, that wage-earning women desire the ballot, not merely, perhaps not mainly, because it will increase their wage, but because, as a symbol of equality, it would secure for them a greater respect in business dealings with men. The fact that twenty per cent. of women are wage-earners and that only five per cent. of the women in industrial Massachusetts voted that they wished the suffrage, does not confirm this claim. But were it true, what then? Over two-thirds of the wage-earning women in the United States cease to be wage-earners at thirty-five; over half cease to be wage-earners at twenty-five; that is, wage-earning largely ceases at the marrying age. It would be interesting to know how many of the wage-earning women who want the ballot as a symbol of equality before marriage desire its responsibilities after marriage. Certainly it is clear that those responsibilities should not be imposed on eighty per cent. of the women of the United States on a vague suspicion that an unknown proportion of twenty per cent. of temporarily employed wage-earners think it might add to their business standing during their temporary engagement in business.

Finally, we are asked to impose the ballot upon women as a means of securing moral reforms which the men are either unwilling or incompetent to accomplish. Perhaps the argument which has been most effective to counterbalance the objection of women to assume the responsibilities of the suffrage has been the argument that they could vote for the abolition of the saloon. In the ancient legend, St. George rescues the maiden from the dragon. I confess that I have small sympathy with the spirit which calls on the maiden to fight the dragon and leaves St. George on the other side of the wall looking on to see how the conflict will terminate. The

women who are affected by this argument, and perhaps the women who use it, forget that Hebrew history had a Jezebel as well as a Queen Esther, and a European history a Lucretia Borgia and a Catherine de Medici as well as a Queen Victoria. Vice, ignorance, and superstition are not confined to either sex. Advocates of woman's suffrage aver improvement of conditions in woman suffrage States; opponents of woman's suffrage aver deteriorated conditions in woman suffrage States. Into the contention between these two classes of observers, each of whom probably see what they wish to see, I decline to enter. I accept instead the testimony of such impartial observers as the President of the United States, who has said: "I am unable to see that there has been any special improvement in the position of women in those States in the West that have adopted woman suffrage as compared with those States adjoining them that have not adopted it. I do not think that giving the women suffrage will produce any marked improvement in the condition of women." I accept the testimony of Mr. Root, in a published letter from him based on his certainly large opportunities for a study of this question: "I do not myself consider that the granting of suffrage to women would, under the existing conditions, be any improvement in our system of government. On the contrary, I think it would rather reduce than increase the electoral efficiency of our people." I accept the testimony of Mr. James Bryce, as disinterested, impartial, and sympathetic an observer of American conditions as America has ever known: "No evidence has come in my way tending to show that politics either in Wyoming or in Washington are in any way purer than in the adjoining States and Territories. The most that seems to be alleged is that they are no worse; or, as the Americans express it, 'Things are very much what they were before, only more so.'" This was published in 1888. It is safe to say that nothing has occurred within the last twenty years materially to change this judgment.²

President Roosevelt, in his address before the Mothers' Meeting in Washington in 1905, said: "The primary duty of the husband is to be the home-maker, the breadwinner for his wife and children

²For Mr. Roosevelt's and Mr. Root's letters see *The Outlook* for December 19, 1908, p. 849; for Mr. Bryce's testimony see *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. III, p. 297.

(and, may I add, to be her protector from violence); the primary duty of the woman is to be the helpmeet, the housewife and mother." In these words Mr. Roosevelt has gone to the heart of the woman question. The call to woman to leave her duty to take up man's duties is an impossible call. The call on man to impose on woman his duty, in addition to hers, is an unjust call. Fathers, husbands, brothers, speaking for the silent women, I claim for them the right to be exempt in the future from the burden from which they have been exempt in the past. Mothers, wives, sisters, I urge you not to allow yourselves to be enticed into assuming functions for which you have no inclination, by appeals to your spirit of self-sacrifice. Woman's instinct is the star that guides her to her divinely appointed life, and it guides to the manger where an infant is laid.